

## About the Community Oriented Defender Network

The Brennan Center created the Community Oriented Defender Network as a way to honor *Gideon's* 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003. Since its inception, the Network has grown from eight to over 50 agencies. These “community defenders” share the view that the representation of individuals charged with crimes can be made more effective by defenders’ deep engagement with the communities in which their clients live.

Community defenders recognize that an individual's contact with the criminal justice system offers a rare moment in which to address many of that individual's most critical needs, including those that lie beyond the immediate realm of the legal system. Collaboration with community members, community based organizations, schools, health care providers, other service providers, and a broad range of other institutional players, can produce a variety of opportunities for clients—opportunities far less likely to become available when representation is provided exclusively on the traditional model.

Engaging the community is seldom has strictly extralegal benefits, for it is often through established relationships in the community that defenders are best able to improve clients' case outcomes—including through resolutions that include diversion, sentence mitigation, and the avoidance of civil sanctions. Some community defenders have also embraced a “holistic” model of defense services, undertaking to address clients' full set of legal (and other) needs, including by providing “civil legal services” to resolve clients' housing disputes, family court issues, benefits claims, and other legal concerns.

Beyond the courtroom, community defenders are well positioned to tackle the systemic problems that affect the communities in which their clients live. Because they have a unique vantage point from which to witness how policy choices play out in residents' lives, they can testify as experts in state and local legislatures, help communities construct better policies, and work with public officials to craft laws and policies. They can also perform an essential function by educating the media and the public about what the government's role should be with respect to the criminal justice system.

The Community Oriented Defender Network also helps to build the capacity of participating defenders to achieve needed public policy reforms in their communities, particularly in the area of racial justice.

The Brennan Center for Justice guides the ongoing work of the Community Oriented Defender Network. Among its activities, the Brennan Center partners with defender programs to research racial disparities in police and prosecution practices, works with defender programs to secure racial justice reforms, and promotes best practices that constitute the Community Oriented Defense model.

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